

Oral History Interview

with

Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

July 10, 2008

by G. David Anderson
University Archivist and Historian

For the George Washington University Oral History Program

ANDERSON: This is the fourth interview with Dr. Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, President Emeritus of the university, George Washington University, and also University Professor of Public Service. The interview is taking place in President Trachtenberg's office in the Media and Public Affairs building, on the George Washington University campus. Again, thank you very much for continuing these interviews.

TRACHTENBERG: It's always good to see you.

ANDERSON: We're getting into some years. As I mentioned before, the itinerary will be basically somewhat chronological to begin with.

TRACHTENBERG: Sure.

ANDERSON: And then we can take a look at the whole interviews and then see if we want to go back and get into some specific areas in a lot more detail.

TRACHTENBERG: Right.

ANDERSON: We finished 1992 in the last interview. And now beginning with 1993, one of the first things that comes to mind was the inauguration of President Clinton. And two things, one was the inaugural ball, which we have alluded to before. But also, the fact that the university became the press center for the, for U.S. president Bill Clinton's inauguration. Was this, again, something that you had originated, or did they approach the university about this, or . . . ?

TRACHTENBERG: No. It was our idea. We went to them to see if there was a role we could play. And again, to some extent, this is a classic compare and contrast with President Elliott. President Elliott had made a judgment that having the university participate in the inauguration proceedings was a mistake, and he did not, in fact, allow the university to, during his tenure, to participate in inauguration proceedings or high level meetings between heads of state. And he felt that these were disruptive of the normal campus life and a distraction to students and faculty from their teaching and scholarship. And that, by the way, is as plausible and as sound an argument as you are likely to hear. And I agree with him. So, you say, well, if you agree with it,

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

why did you go in a totally different direction and work diligently during your tenure to open the campus and to bring events like this on to the campus? And I confess I did it informed by a different perspective. I think that G.W. is in a competitive race for the very best teachers and the very best faculty, and that life is composed of many components, and not all of them are gravitas. Not all of them are the most serious. And that part of life is the engagement; part of a campus is the engagement with things that are going on around you. And opening the campus, bringing onto the campus things which are interesting, useful, and dare I say, even a little frivolous, entertaining. And I concluded, talking to students and reflecting on it, that we add value to G.W. by bringing to the campus inaugurations, and political speakers and visiting heads of state. And acknowledging the merit of President Elliott's reservations. And recognizing that you can go overboard. You have to do this with a careful, thoughtful hand. Having some of these events, in fact, is one of the things that made us unique and different from Syracuse or Boston or other places, that being in Washington needed to be celebrated. And so, here's one example of where I saw an opportunity. To have the university serve the country. Have the events serve the students and the faculty. Engage them and give them back a little something having to do with why they came into G.W. in the first place. Because it was in Washington. So it was taking advantage of location. So there's a real interesting and debatable point between Dr. Elliott and me and our take on this kind of an issue. And I'd be the first to acknowledge the soundness of his thinking, and the fact that I'd like to believe that the alternative had its own merits and its own justification. And did not repudiate, but merely created an alternative to Dr. Elliott's way of going forward.

ANDERSON: Very interesting. 1993 was also the year that you created the Oscar and Shoshana Trachtenberg Faculty Prize.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. Yes. My parents, of course, never having gone to a university themselves, but having made great sacrifices so that I could do so, had great esteem for teachers and for learning, as for universities. They thought they were special places. And it seemed to me that in an effort to add something to G.W. and at the same time celebrate the memory of my parents, both of them passed by the time this prize was established, giving some money to the university to create an ongoing prize in their name to celebrate certain aspects of the university mission, was a good thing.

ANDERSON: Was this something that you had been thinking of for several years? You began basically in '88. And it wasn't until '93 that you started this.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes it was. It was probably something I was thinking about. I had done something similar at the University of Hartford. So it wasn't completely innovative. But part of it had to do with the fact that I was going to pay for it. And so I wanted to put a few dollars together to make the gift to G.W. of my own currency to endow the prize. And so, that gave me a little bit of pause until I did it.

ANDERSON: Well, I found it interesting that the year that you created the Oscar Shoshana Trachtenberg prize was also the same year that you were named Father of the Year by the Urban League. [laughs]

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: You know, you're absolutely right, but it was fortuitous. I can assure you. Yes, that's right. It's funny, because I remember at the ceremony, whoever it was that was giving the prize; they don't give it to one person; they had several fathers of the year. One was Marion Barry, you know, the mayor. And I think I may have been, I may have been, but maybe not, I may have been the only white person celebrated that year. And I remember when I came down, whoever had announced the prize, when I went up to get the award said "and now, for the third or the fourth African American father of the year, Stephen Trachtenberg." And I came back afterwards, and my son said to me "I didn't know you were African American." He was a little kid at the time. And I said "only tonight, I'm an honorary African American." It was a lovely evening. Very much family centered, as you can imagine. And it was very nice to be accepted into that community. Particularly the Urban League. Because my father had been a member of the Urban League before me, and had been very active in the Bedford-Stuyvesant chapter of the Urban League in Brooklyn when I was kid. And as a boy, he used to take me to Urban League meetings. So the Urban League has always had a special place in my heart.

ANDERSON: I just find it very fortuitous that these both occurred the same year.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: That was also, you co-edited a book called entitled *The Art of Hiring in America's Colleges and Universities*. It was published in 1993. Is this something that you've been working on for a long time? Because that seems like a rather, I mean, it's a more direct subject than some of your other books. It's very specific to a detail.

TRACHTENBERG: It's a subject I had been thinking about for a long time. Since I'd gotten into university work. First at Boston University and then the University of Hartford. The real inspiration for the book was my co-author, who approached me and said, "Hey, I think you and I could write, or edit an interesting book on this subject." And so we did. And as I go back and look at that book from time to time now, I'm not sure I agree with everything I wrote in the book. So it's amusing to reflect back on slightly radical or innovative or different ideas that you had at one point in your life and conclude on the basis of experience and maturity that maybe they weren't as clever as you thought they were.

ANDERSON: What were some specifics? I know, that is to me, that is quite an art, hiring individuals, hiring the right individuals. Did some of the changes in your perspective deal with prerequisites that someone would need? Or did they deal with other specialty areas?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, you know, I think hiring is a combination of an art and a science. And my observation is that social scientists and psychologists have refined the science of human interaction over the years, and there is a capacity now, through the use of instruments and large statistical databases and stuff, to draw informed conclusions about people who are candidates for positions. It is not absolutely solid science. We're not talking about mathematics, where it's right or it's wrong. And so there's a fudge factor in there. But it has, you know, the predictability and the vulnerability of, let's say, the SAT exams that we give. Helpful, but not dispositive. So much for the science. The art has to do with your own maturing and your own ability over time, to trust your judgment. And because you hired people in the past, you know

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

what to look for, how to have discussions, one thing or another. And to draw out information. So, you're going to be better at hiring, simply through experience. How to put this into a book is daunting. And I tried to come up with some ideas. But as I look back on it, I'm not sure. I'm not sure I agree with all of the ideas. If I had the text here, I could be more explicit. For example, one idea I had was that instead of asking a search committee to go out and scour the universe and come back and give the decision maker three candidates from which he or she would pick one, they'd be the decision maker, to go out and scour the universe, and then give the committee three candidates from which they would pick one. And that seemed to be very clever, because I always liked what Mayor Daly of Chicago said. "If you let me pick the candidates, I'll let you run the election." And so I thought, if the president of the university, let's say, could identify three candidates he would be happy to have as a dean, and then give those three candidates to a search committee and let the search committee sort through the three and pick the one. Presumably that would work. And I think it would, in many cases. What it lacks is the appropriate optics. I think it's important that the ultimate person prevails in getting a job. Needs to have some sense of obligation, some sense of responsibility, accountability to the person who designated them for the job. And if you have the committee making that decision, then it's diffused. Whereas if the president makes the decision, then the new dean had some fealty to the president. And I think that's not something that would be treated lightly or dissipated.

ANDERSON: Marvin interviewed everybody.

TRACHTENBERG: A smaller place and a slower time.

ANDERSON: Exactly. And of course, Dr. Elliott diversified that, where the deans had the main responsibilities. Did you mainly restrict yourself to, like, the vice-presidents or specialty areas, or . . . ?

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, deans of course.

ANDERSON: Deans, obviously.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes, I mean, John Silver, my mentor, said "you know, you must interview everybody who's going to be recruited with tenure," and on and on and on. And in a more perfect world I think that's true. It's right. It's just that, you know, I discovered that even working seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, there wasn't enough time to do it all. And so recognizing that some people were going to slip through that I might not have hired if I had interviewed them, I decided I was going to have to simply trust the judgment of faculty and committees and vice presidents and things and deans, and not interview every single promotion to tenure, every single hire with tenure, and have my personal stamp on it. I knew that people would slip through who I wouldn't approve of and they would turn out later on to be a mistake. But I concluded in the end that that would probably be true even if I were interviewing them all. After all, I'm not god. You know, I have some prescience and some insights but not perfect. And so the question then became a cost benefit analysis, a ratio. How many inappropriate people are going to slip through if you don't actually do it yourself? I concluded that it was a small number and that the institution would survive regardless. And that I was simply going to kill myself if I tried to do every detail of work.

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

ANDERSON: Sure. Did you reserve for yourself the right, though, to review anything that you wanted to review?

TRACHTENBERG: Absolutely. I mean, I didn't give up the power of the presidency. I don't think you can do that. I think under the charter there are certain obligations that the board of trustees has, and they delegate them to the president. The president can't give them away.

ANDERSON: Exactly. I found one thing in doing fairly intensive work with the university's charter over the years, the aspect about that no one could be held at fault because of religion. Basically that one standard set by the congress, which is still in the charter.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: Also found that one situation had arisen, in the, I think it was late 1920s, which a Seventh Day Adventist refused to go to medical classes on Saturday and they wanted to expel him. He sued and he won. Because it's in the charter.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: And I know that the charter has been revised many times. Just to follow up one thing on that. The last thing that I'm fully aware of is 1973, when Dr. Elliott had a revision of the university's charter. Has there been a major revision since that point, of the charter?

TRACHTENBERG: Not that I recall. I don't like to mess with the charter. You've got to go to Congress to do that. So I was always very hesitant. And I didn't see anything in the charter that desperately called out for regress. It's a fairly flexible document. It lets you run the university pretty well. Not generally an issue. What I find is that GW in its own way was very progressive almost from the conception, but it had all the bigotries in other ways of its time. This was not a congenial place for African Americans for a long long time. There's the very famous story of Ingrid Bergman and picketing by various African American veterans groups and one thing or another. And while I don't know this personally to be true, there is this lingering kind of implication that President Marvin himself may have had some reservations about black people at the university and maybe even other groups. He was very much, you know, a man of his time. What is fascinating to me is not the judging of people who were of their time but the genius of people who were ahead of their time. And what comes to mind of course is George Washington, our namesake, and that remarkable letter to the congregation in Rhode Island. His famous letter that says essentially, no intolerance will be permitted and no discrimination. That this people was going to be open to people of all faiths and . . . And you say, how in the world, how in the world was he thinking thoughts of such a contemporary nature at the time that he was thinking them? And it gives you a little bit of a flavor of what it is that makes great people. That they have a view of the future. And they have it now. They have a view of the way the world could be rather than necessarily the way it is. Whereas most of us, of course, see the world as it is and assume that's the way it's going to be forever. And has to be. As Kennedy said, there are people who look at the world and see what is. Other people who look at the world and say, what could be? A sense of what could be accomplished. So, we've been touched, I think, GW, by some

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

great people. Whether it's President Monroe signing the charter in 1821 or George Washington having a vision of a university in Washington similar to the one that we have here and that bears his name.

ANDERSON: I find that very well put. I've had over the years a challenge by many of, especially the students, that you have to read in context, I'll use Dr. Marvin as an example. He was definitely a person of his time.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeh.

ANDERSON: That doesn't, you don't come after the individual. You come after the period of time. You try to change the situations that exist that caused them. And I know many students look at things, especially historically, and they get very, they come back aghast at what they read. They don't fully understand that this was a cultural or social norm for a short period. Whether it be right or wrong, it was still a cultural social norm that did evolve. I know that the follow up on that question, I've often, in many lectures, said that the university was very much a white university through the 1950s, even almost through the 1960s, for that matter.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: But today, as of, I know about five or six years ago, it was listed as one of the top universities for African-American students to attend.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: So, it's made the full circle.

TRACHTENBERG: There's no question.

ANDERSON: Owed to, not only yourself but even previous president that have really pushed for this.

TRACHTENBERG: That's right. That's right. And we are now increasingly a university of our time, and my guess is there's something that we're doing that we take for granted that twenty years from now, forty years from now, people will wonder at our primitive behavior. A faculty member, a gay faculty member was talking to me the other day reminding me of the time when a couple of gay faculty came to me wanting me to change one of our benefit plans to allow gay partners to participate in our health insurance scheme. And this was not the case at any of the other universities in the city and I didn't know if I wanted to be the pioneer in this matter. I said, if they would permit me, I would look into it. I promised them full faith, and I asked them to come see me in about three months. And then I got Susan Kaplan to head up a little, a task force to look into all the implications of their request, what it would cost us, what would it would mean to expand the universe of people who fell into our insurance pool and one thing or another. And she came back and reassured me that this was something we could do, with only a minimum of new risk. And then I had to deal with the political implications of it. And I decided it wasn't something that ought to be done by the president as a you case, but rather ought to be voted by

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

the Board of Trustees. And so I tried to go out and count the votes on the Board of Trustees and I realized that there were some trustees that were opposed to it. And so I went back to this faculty group and I said “please, I need for you to be a little bit politically sophisticated and be more trusting than faculty groups conventionally are of administrators, and give me the time to do this right. And content yourself with the fact that I’m committing myself to make it happen. And they were quite splendid. And they said, “Okay, how long”? And I said, “It will take me a year.” And then I went about visiting with all of the key trustees who I thought had strong feelings on this and many were persuaded by my arguments, and one or two were not persuaded, and I finally said, “look, I’m going to be obliged to bring this to the board of trustees. I would like your vote and I want you to do it for me. I want you to trust my leadership, that I am taking the university in the right direction. Even if you think it’s wrong, say “Stephen thinks it’s right and I’m going to vote with him.” And I got it down to one dissent, and eventually, that person came around out of friendship with me. And when it came before the board, it was unanimous. And it’s turned out exactly the way we anticipated. It has not been a problem. We were one of the first universities to go in this direction. Now corporate America, of course, has gone in this direction, and little by little over the states, you’re seeing one state after another allow gay people to actually have either civil unions or marriage. So, you know, we were sort of at the cutting edge of a moment in public policy of the country. Now, this issue hasn’t gone away. It’s still being debated. It’s still an issue in the political discourse of the country. But I was pleased that it was addressed on this campus in a civil and congenial and appropriate manner. And that the solution, of course, was one positive; even if you disagree with the outcome, you have to be impressed with the working of the governing system.

ANDERSON: Sure. I agree with that.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes.

ANDERSON: I hope to follow up with a number of articles in the Encyclopedia on various groups, including the gay rights students. And so I really appreciate your going into detail on this. This is something that will help me.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, it’s interesting. Several years later, there was some staff member, I think, was dismissed. And he sued us saying the reason he was dismissed was because the institution was anti-gay. And our lawyers wanted to settle the case. And I said, “No,” “I’m not going to settle this case. We are not anti-gay and we are not going to settle it and we’re not going to confess to anything that isn’t true here.” Oh, they were very concerned, and I said, “Here are some faculty who I worked with to get these partners’ court issues resolved, and I want you to call them and see if they won’t testify on behalf of the university against their fellow gay person on this issue over the university.” And to a person, men and women, they said they would, and when we had, I don’t know, several affidavits from these people, we went back to this plaintiff, this person who was suing us, and in the face of the evidence we had, his lawyer dropped the case, and we prevailed. And I thought, you know, justice has triumphed and, you know, we had done the right thing upfront, and it had a harvest, a reward later on.

ANDERSON: Thank you. That was very informative. Switch a little bit to, I won’t say less serious, because a lot of people think basketball is a religion.

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: I take it seriously.

ANDERSON: [laughter] Including myself and my wife. But, at least you would think so, by the number of games that we go to. And of course the number of games you've gone to. Uh, you okay?

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. I just spilled some coffee on myself. Yes.

ANDERSON: My wife tried to match ties with what I'm going to have for dinner a lot of times so is has the less [laughs] effect.

TRACHTENBERG: Right.

ANDERSON: The less effect. 1993 was the first time that the men's basketball team made it to the Sweet 16. And of course, it wasn't the first time that GW had gone to the NCAA. That had happened back in '61. And then for the first time later on, actually, in your tenure. But, second time, I should say. But the first time we made it all the way to the Sweet 16 and I remember watching it on TV here. Did you have the opportunity to attend that?

TRACHTENBERG: Oh yes.

ANDERSON: I thought you would. I thought you did.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh yeah.

ANDERSON: And, what, is basketball for you something, is it a personal favorite or something that you wanted to do as part of being president, to attend all the games, or just something you just purely enjoyed. [laughter]

TRACHTENBERG: Well, all of the above. I mean, I enjoyed them, so I went for my own pleasure. But I would have gone even if I didn't enjoy them, because I think, maybe not as frequently, but I think university presidents simply have to be seen. It's an optical job and you need to be seen at public events, particularly events that are attended by large numbers of the stakeholders and constituents and students and alumni. And so, I think the university president has to be present at these events and has to be seen cheering enthusiastically.

ANDERSON: How many, just let me follow up on that a little bit. I know you attend a lot of basketball games because I see you there.

TRACHTENBERG: Right. I go now.

ANDERSON: Right. Of course. Of course. In fact, it's, now, it's even more for the love of the game, I would think, in that respect. But how diversified did you get as far as sports was concerned here? There are so many sports going on.

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: That's exactly right. And so I would periodically show up at crew, woman's basketball of course, as well as men's. And then once in a while, a softball game or other sporting events. Soccer and things like that. But you simply can't. It will eat you alive. You could make a full time occupation out of going to some of these events.

ANDERSON: I've learned that as well. So I can empathize with that statement wholeheartedly. This is jumping ahead a little bit, but what are your impressions of Joe McKeown lately as far as the women's basketball coach?

TRACHTENBERG: Oh, I think he gave it a great run here. And I think he may have just gotten bored being in the same place. It was a chance to get into a Big 10, you know, Northeastern. I think also, this won't come out in tomorrow's paper, so I can speak freely. People have multiple agendas in their lives. They have their professional agendas and they have their private agendas. The McKeowns have been blessed with two children, and one of their child is a challenge from god, a youngster with a variety of ailments. There are programs that assist parents with these burdens, and I believe that Northeastern and Illinois have a particularly robust way of addressing and assisting parents with these issues. And so I think that, coincidentally, they came up with a professional opportunity for him to coach Northeastern's (Northwestern's?) women's basketball team, which after many years here, I forget if he's here 14, 15, 16 years, might have seemed like a refreshing new way to begin at a very competitive institution. I can't believe they paid him a lot more than he was making here, because he was at the top of the pay scale for people with his job in the country. But they may have been able to help him with that second agenda in a way that we couldn't. Because, as I say, Illinois and that university has some programs that deal with, I think it's autism.

ANDERSON: Right.

TRACHTENBERG: And so, it may have been something that provided some relief for the family, for his wife, and that's all very important. And then, every once in a while, it's just nice to erase the blackboard and start all over again.

ANDERSON: It is. Joe had related almost exactly the same thing you told me.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh is that right?

ANDERSON: So I was knowledgeable of that. That was a major factor in his thinking. Because I know he does very much like the university, without a doubt.

TRACHTENBERG: He had a good arrangement here. We all move and there are two things that get us to move. The things that push us and the things that pull us. And I think in this situation it was the things that pulled him rather than the things that pushed him, because he was not pushed here to leave. On the contrary, people wanted him to stay. He was well regarded, well compensated, had a winning tradition. The people he reported to respected him and liked him. I just think, you know, one morning, he said, "Hey, here's a fresh opportunity."

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

ANDERSON: Right. I wish him luck. In fact, I told Joe that Blanche and I would be out to see him, because we go to, our first date was in Chicago, actually, so we get up there from time to time. And I have relatives in Evanston, so I went up as a teen, and the first college sweatshirt I ever had was from Northwestern. So it's kind of an interesting overlap of . . .

TRACHTENBERG: It's a wonderful school. It's located in a gorgeous suburb of Chicago. Chicago itself, adjacent, is a wonderful city. The only thing I would wonder at is his willingness to move from what is basically a temperate climate here in Washington to what is a very robust winter in Chicago. But maybe Al Gore has told him something about global warming, helped to inform his decision.

ANDERSON: Well, we did see a couple glaciers that were drying up in Alaska, I must admit. It's kind of scary in some respects.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeh, sure.

ANDERSON: In '93, the Jacob Burns Alcove was dedicated at the National Law Center, and this was one of a series of things to increase the size of the law school. I know that, I believe it was either in '94 or '95 that we also had the protests from the law students.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh yes.

ANDERSON: The overall policy or plan for the law school, was it to continually expand the law school? I know just recently it expanded into what used to be the old president's offices. Is there a plan to move it into the entire university yard complex?

TRACHTENBERG: Conceivably over time I think a lot of that will depend on new construction. There is as you know, one side of the yard that's still open. My expectation is that in the fullness of time, a building will be constructed that will enclose the yard, and keep the yard as open space. But that there will be another set of buildings. Samson Hall is likely to be torn down. It's a very old, very inefficient and not very good building. And then you could build from that corner across, hopefully with some open arches which would allow opening, and you'd end up with an Oxford like architectural result, with a courtyard in the middle and a building along there, and the law school could conceivably get that space. Then, once a new science building gets built, conceivably Corcoran Hall could be dedicated to the law school. Again, all of these things are going to call for trade offs and it's dangerous to predict the future, probably only a little more dangerous than trying to understand the past. And so whether one is talking about what's going to come, or what has happened, you're always at risk. And subject to interpretation. But yes, one could come across and come around, pass the rose garden, you could take all of Corcoran Hall, tear down Samson, build all the way around it, have the entire block, really, become a law school, and that is a vision that I have had. But again, it's a forty, fifty, sixty year vision.

ANDERSON: Well, I find that very fascinating because you have almost described the Harris Plan, which was pre-Marvin. That's what they wanted to do, was to build an Oxford-like . . .

TRACHTENBERG: Is that right?

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

ANDERSON: square around the university yard.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, I didn't know it. I didn't know that, but

ANDERSON: Great minds think alike.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, it's a logical way to go, of course.

ANDERSON: It is. It is.

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. Yes,

ANDERSON: But it would be fascinating to me to see that come to fruition at one point, you know.

TRACHTENBERG: Well, if we live to see that, we will be old men. [laughter]

ANDERSON: Now, one thing I do want to speak of, '93 was important because of the first presidential medal. Václav Havel, is it? President of the Czech Republic, received the first presidential medal. Would you mind speaking as to what brought about the development or the evolution of the presidential medal? And then, later, who gets the presidential medal?

TRACHTENBERG: Right. Um, well.

ANDERSON: And is this still being carried, do you know?

TRACHTENBERG: I don't know. I invented the presidential medal. It seemed to me that GW was an institution that needed to seize opportunity. Periodically, circumstances presented at the last minute, a head of state or a distinguished person, an accomplished person, Nobel prize winner, somebody that I think people would generally agree deserve to be noticed. People who at a less complicated institution, the university would give an honorary degree to. Giving an honorary degree is complicated here. It calls for participation by many groups in the institution. There's faculty who want to be consulted, and rightfully so. And trustees want to be consulted, and rightly so. And so you get great buy-in, but you also get a certain amount of sclerosis because it's a slow and painful process. Meanwhile, you don't want to miss the opportunity. So I thought, couldn't we invent an alternative honor which came with enough halo that the recipient felt celebrated, felt they were getting acknowledged, but where it was the president's medal, whereas the honorary degree is the university's award. And so the president in his capacity can issue the president's medal. Now, you do so at your peril. If you give the president's medal foolishly, recklessly, inappropriately, if you give it to people who pass discredit on the institution, you ultimately cast discredit on the president and that means you, and people will reprimand you. So you have the burden of personal responsibility as well as professional responsibility in giving the president's medal, but you only have to consult yourself, initially. And that's why it was created. And here was Václav Havel, a distinguished head of state, a poet, a playwright, a man of democracy, and he was going to be here. I think the

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

ambassador called me up and said could he come. They'd like to give him a chance to make a talk in Washington. And so we provided a venue. And he came and gave a talk and we did a cocktail party, you know, a reception, and he gave the talk, and it needed a punctuation mark. And so we gave him the President's Medal. To have gotten him an honorary degree, which would have been a nice thing and an appropriate thing, would have called on the phones, and consultations, and so we didn't do that. Now, who gets the president's medal? Well, people who deserve the president's medal. And so they turn out to be artists and musicians and scholars, of course, politicians, etc. And I like to think one reinforces the other. That having the president's medal, as years went on, people said, "well what is this presidential medal?" We could say to them, "well hold on, let's give you a list of who your predecessors are in this award," and when they heard who had gotten the medal in the past, they were willing to take the medal in lieu of an honorary degree. Because it had been given to so many luminaries. There was some continuing virtue in that. Giving too many honorary degrees each year degrades the honorary degree. I think as it is the honorary degree in America has been significantly compromised from what it was in early times. And probably, one could almost make a case, it should never be given to politicians. It should only go to scholars. There are some institutions, as you know, that don't give honorary degrees at all. Others have a limited number. We have a limited number. It's about a half a dozen a year. And I think to give more than that is probably an error. So this gives us a second pathway.

ANDERSON: Well, having served on the convocations committee for twelve, thirteen years, I guess now, I understand part of that process, of where that goes and how it goes. Do you have an advisory committee as far as whom you select for the president's medal, or is this totally up to yourself?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, in the end, it was totally up to the president, but, yes, of course, we're all in these jobs surrounded by colleagues. You don't run out and drag somebody in off the street and sling the medal around them. So, you know, inevitably, you're going to ask a staff member, would you do this, do some research on the person, and they would come back and say, listen, I'm not sure you'll want to do that. I mean, you know, we're all the same, interacting all the time with staff and the office and I gather, you know, there are people who worry, well, that's not very good, because your staff are always going to agree with you. Well, I never discovered that with my staff. They were encouraged to disagree with me. It was the only way I could get an honest sounding board. And so every now and again, I'd say, "how about so and so for a medal?" And people would say, don't be ridiculous. You'd be a laughing stock, you know, that person is . . ." and then they'd tell me something about the person. And I would either agree and say, "okay, forget about it," or I'd say, "well, I don't know. It seems to me that I could justify doing that." Sometimes I'd go ahead. Even Babe Ruth didn't hit a home run every time.

ANDERSON: Oh sure. Well, I will be compiling a list of those for the encyclopedia. That's on my list to do this year. And from the list that I've seen so far, there's nothing that would appear to me to be a difficulty at all, as far as the number of people you've chosen over the years.

TRACHTENBERG: Yeh, I mean, we didn't clean out the prisons.

ANDERSON: There's always someone who disagrees with someone but overall . . .

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

TRACHTENBERG: That's right. I mean, you know, as I think back over the years, you know, you could say, "well, why did you give an honorary degree to the president, you know, President Mubarak of Egypt?" And you know, at the time I got letters from Copts saying that the Copts weren't treated properly in Egypt. And Mubarak wasn't as enthusiastic about protecting their interests as possible. You know, I went to Egypt and looked. You know, I saw Copt churches everywhere, and I recognize that it is tough to be a Christian Copt in an Islamic country like Egypt. But I didn't feel I was giving an honorary degree merely to Mubarak. I thought I was giving an honorary degree, in a manner of speaking, to his predecessor Sadat, who had had the courage to go to Jerusalem and to come to a resolution with Israel. I thought I was giving an honorary degree to the people of Egypt. This is a very consequential country today. But also historically, going all the way back frankly to the Pharaohs, pre-Islamic. This is a country that defines Arabic there. Their language is to Arabic what I guess the King's, or the Queen's English is to English. And it's a country of literature and art and a place that has made immense contributions to the Abrahamic faiths, all three of them, and to culture in general. So once, while I was in Egypt and I was coming out of visiting President Mubarak and some TV people surrounded me, and it was about a year after we had given him the honorary degree, they asked me about it. And I said, "look, an honorary degree to the president of a country is not to the individual alone. It is to his people. It is to his country. And I thought we were giving an honorary degree to Egypt."

ANDERSON: I really like that rationale. I'm sure you have received honorary degrees where it was, I know a lot was for your work personally, but also as your role as president of the university.

TRACHTENBERG: That's right. That's right.

ANDERSON: Can we just ask. It's about twenty-five to twelve. What time did you want to cut this off?

TRACHTENBERG: I should leave at about quarter to, so take ten to fifteen minutes.

ANDERSON: Okay.

(End of side one of tape)

[Note – Tape position starts at number 1]

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

(Tape 1, side 2)

ANDERSON: A green university, I know this is something that started, well, it didn't technically start in '94, but there were aspects of developing, you know, conservation of material before then. But to officially make this a green university, and I know that really, almost that cultivated in the latest gathering, I know, over in front of Fungler Hall, of the interactions and even the furtherance of a green university. What are your basic feelings on this and your thoughts as to when this occurred back in '94?

TRACHTENBERG: Well, I'm very pleased to see that President Knapp is following in this tradition, with even in some ways greater commitment than I myself brought to it. As it becomes more and more apparent or obvious that all of us as civilized educated people need to have some commitment to environmental issues, to using our resources in a prudent manner and one which is in harmony with nature. I don't want to sound too much like a tree hugger but I do think that the impact that our species is having on the planet has to be acknowledged, our consumption of fossil fuels, carbon omissions, how we put up buildings, how we collect and dispose of our trash, how we use electricity and fuel oil, the fact that we fill the air with pollutants, is very important. I am inspired by two things. One, the fact that I have children, and I hope to have at some point grandchildren, and I'd like to leave them a world they can live in. And so I don't want to eat all the seed corn of society and make it impossible for subsequent generations to go forward. But secondly, I've done a number of Outward Bound trips, and one of the things I've noticed, and learned through these, is that when you enter into a wilderness area, and I've gone down the Grand Canyon and gone rafting in Alaska, things like that, you take all your waste out. You don't leave fecal matter. You don't leave cans. You don't leave paper. You don't leave trash, food, anything behind to the extent that it's possible. Dig deep holes and bury the, bury refuse and put rocks on top, make sure that animals cannot dig it out and litter, but also take as much of it out to be disposed of later. So that people who follow you into these wilderness areas will find it substantially the way it was when you arrived. Well, I think that's true not only in wilderness areas but increasingly in our more built up areas, and so I think responsible people need to lead responsible lives. And I'm pleased that the university now takes leads and these kinds of things into account when it does construction. I thought it was interesting that when I left the university, the president downsized on the size of the university vehicle, which he obviously did with an environmental concern. The only problem I have is that if the president wants to take a group of people with him to a meeting or some place like that, it's going to be very hard to do it with the vehicle that he's now got.

ANDERSON: That's very interesting. I know GW, the size of the school, has such an impact. I mean, to not be a . . . right. The next question I have, I may wait until our next meeting, because it involves WETA.

TRACHTENBERG: Sure.

ANDERSON: And the whole controversy that arose out of that, the move to GW.

TRACHTENBERG: Absolutely.

TRACHTENBERG: July 10, 2008

ANDERSON: And I know that will probably take more time than . . .

TRACHTENBERG: Yes. And you'll want to talk to Francine about that too.

ANDERSON: I have that on my list to do that, because I know how involved Francine has been and maybe still is, to some degree. She's not as involved with WETA as she used to be.

TRACHTENBERG: No. She was there full time for thirteen years. But then she was like Joe McKeown. She woke up one morning and said "I'd like to go do some other things."

ANDERSON: I believe she's with the Jewish Community Center.

TRACHTENBERG: She is. She is now. Yes.

ANDERSON: That's a job itself.

TRACHTENBERG: Oh yes. She doesn't get paid, of course.

ANDERSON: Well, with that, let me conclude today. Thank you very much for the interview. This has been very enlightening. I'm getting a lot of materials that I know will supplement even other things that I'm hoping to do with the encyclopedia, the online encyclopedia, historical one.

TRACHTENBERG: Great. Thank you. We did interviews yesterday, radio interviews for this . . . (end of tape)